Ethics Counsel Backed in Gingrich Case

House Democrats Seek Outside Probe of Ethics Complaints Against Speaker

By R.H. Melton
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A majority of House Democrats called on the ethics committee yesterday to name an independent counsel to investigate the four complaints against Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), as the panel began a final round of closed-door deliberations into the allegations.

Just more than 140 of the 203 Democrats in the House signed a letter calling for a "nonpartisan outside" counsel to look into the complaints, saying the "close personal and political ties" that some ethics committee members have to Gingrich had created the "appearance of a conflict of interest."

Washington-area members who signed the letter included Reps. Steny H. Hoyer and Albert R. Wynn of Maryland and James P. Moran of Virginia.

Tony Blankley, Gingrich's press secretary, dismissed the letter as politically inspired troublemaking. "They don't have any pretense other than a partisan act," he said.

The letter was sent to the ethics panel late yesterday just as the committee began sifting through its files as well as material gathered by staff over the spring recess. The committee plans to accelerate its schedule of meetings to two a week and could decide on a special counsel or other options by the time Congress breaks for the Memorial Day holiday.

The complaints accuse the speaker of improperly using two charitable foundations to finance a college course that critics contend was partisan; abusing his office by accepting free time on cable television; violating House rules by allowing a political consultant to use his office; and promoting the college course from the House floor.

That fourth complaint was filed by House Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.), Gingrich's toughest critic in the House and a prime mover behind yesterday's letter to the ethics panel.

In other developments, the Associated Press reported that Gingrich plans to submit an 80,000-word manuscript to his publisher by a Monday deadline, even though the ethics committee has not yet acted on his request for approval of the book deal. "No one needs the committee's approval to write a book," said Jan W. Baran, Gingrich's lawyer.

While House rules do not require approval by the panel, Gingrich voluntarily submitted his revised contract to the committee on March 15. His original book deal brought criticism from Democrats—and some Republicans—largely because it included a $4.5 million advance. The new version calls for a token $1 advance plus royalties.

Baran said the contract will not be executed until HarperCollins sets a publishing date. Referring to that unset deadline, Baran said, "We're not going to do anything without consulting with the ethics committee."

SPEAKER NEWT GINGRICH
. . . ready to submit book manuscript